

# The Florentine art of painting on tile in the fifteenth-sixteenth century: evidences from the examination of artworks by Fra Bartolommeo

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## Origin of the painting on tile in Florence

In the fifteenth century Florence, the urban growth and construction of several architectural monuments (e.g., the Brunelleschi's Dome) encouraged a wider use of brick materials and the production of roof tiles and terracotta within purposely built kilns. The small size, low cost and easy availability as elements left over from building works likely played a key role to favour the use of these "poor" materials as painting supports, for instance for (self-)portraits, as also suggested by the anecdote reported by G. Vasari (1568) and the artworks attributed to Filippino Lippi at the Uffizi Gallery. They actually represent the origin of a mural technique on non-mural supports, with interesting technical/stylistic relationships with the coeval mural painting and a long history until the XX century (Tapete, 2009).



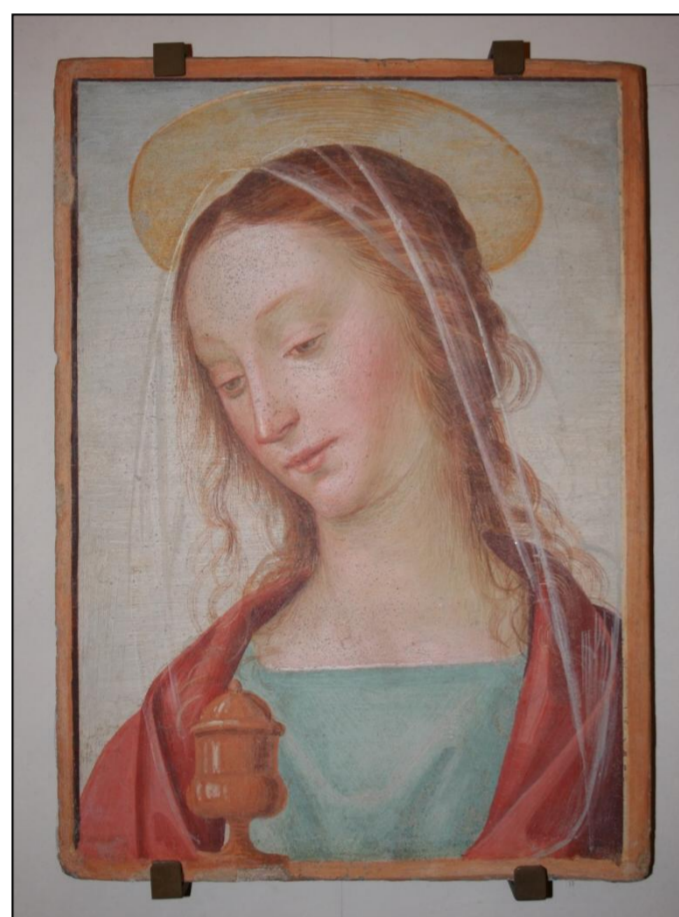
And because, when the work was finished, there were some colours and lime left over, Andrea [del Sarto], taking a tile, called to his wife Lucrezia and said to her: "Come here, for these colours are left over, and I wish to make your portrait [...]". But the woman would not stand still; and Andrea [...] took a mirror and made a portrait of himself on that tile, of such perfection, that it seems alive and as real as nature.

(G. Vasari, *The Lives*, 1568)

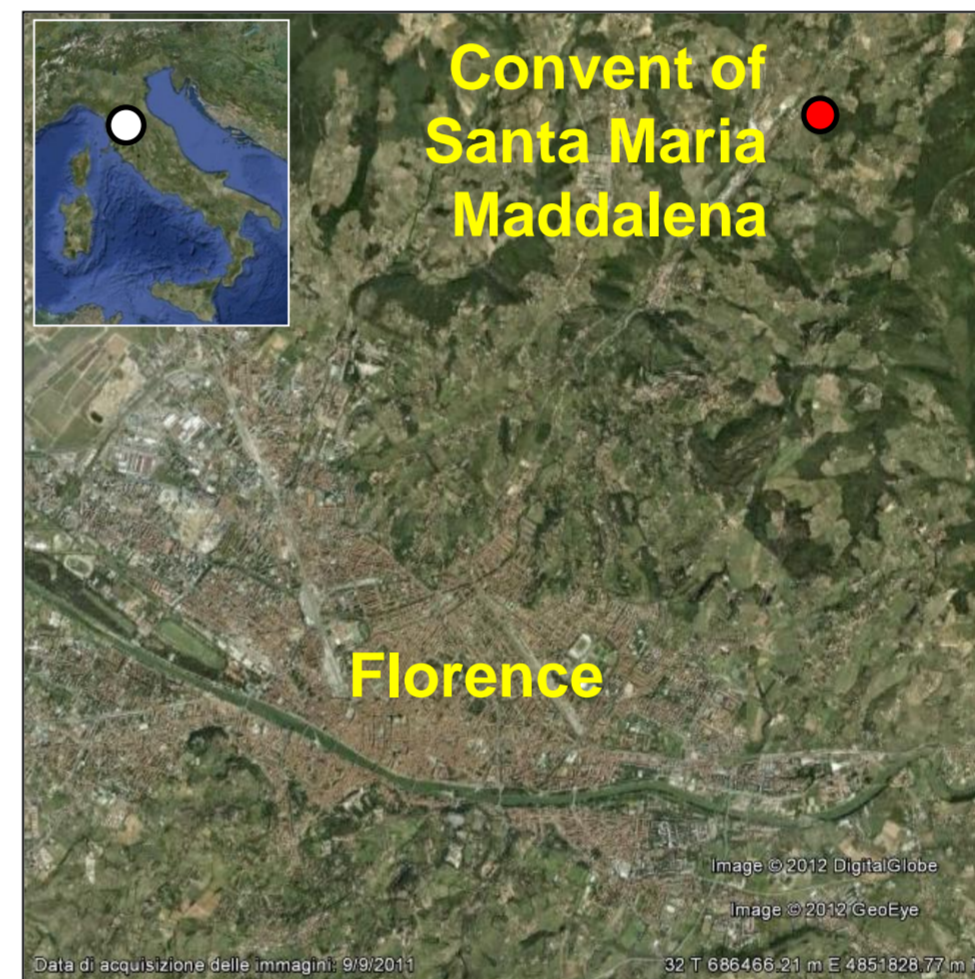


## Painted tiles by Fra Bartolommeo

The first known group of those still preserved in the Florentine museum collections consists in eight frescoed tiles by Bartolommeo di Paolo del Fattorino (Fra Bartolommeo), depicting Christ and Saints, which date back to 1503-1516 and are nowadays exhibited in the Museum of San Marco, Florence. They were formerly moved from the Convent of Santa Maria Maddalena in Pian di Mugnone (an hospice of the Dominican Order of San Marco, not far away from the northern entrance to Florence), according to an archival document which reports that "the tiles were wall embedded" (padre Serafino Loddi, 1736; ACSMF, Loddi, 1736, c. 181 [c. 225]). A confirmation about the former location is provided by the *Ecce Homo* still inserted within the wall surface, along a corridor at the ground floor of the convent.



Two of the frescoed tiles (courtesy Museum of San Marco, Florence) painted by Fra Bartolommeo at the Convent of Santa Maria Maddalena in the early 1500s. It is quite clear their devotional feature. The frescoes are painted over lime-based mortar covering the tile, which is more properly classifiable as "gronda" rather than "embrace".



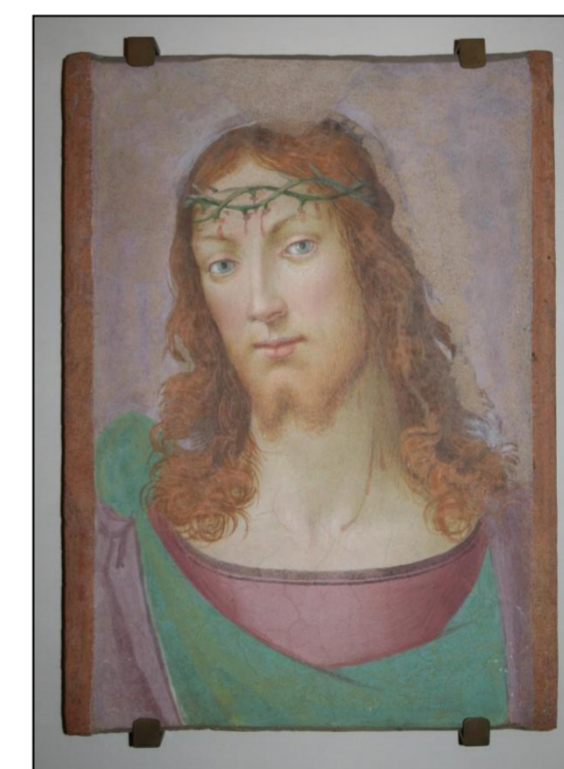
Courtesy Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

## Materials and techniques

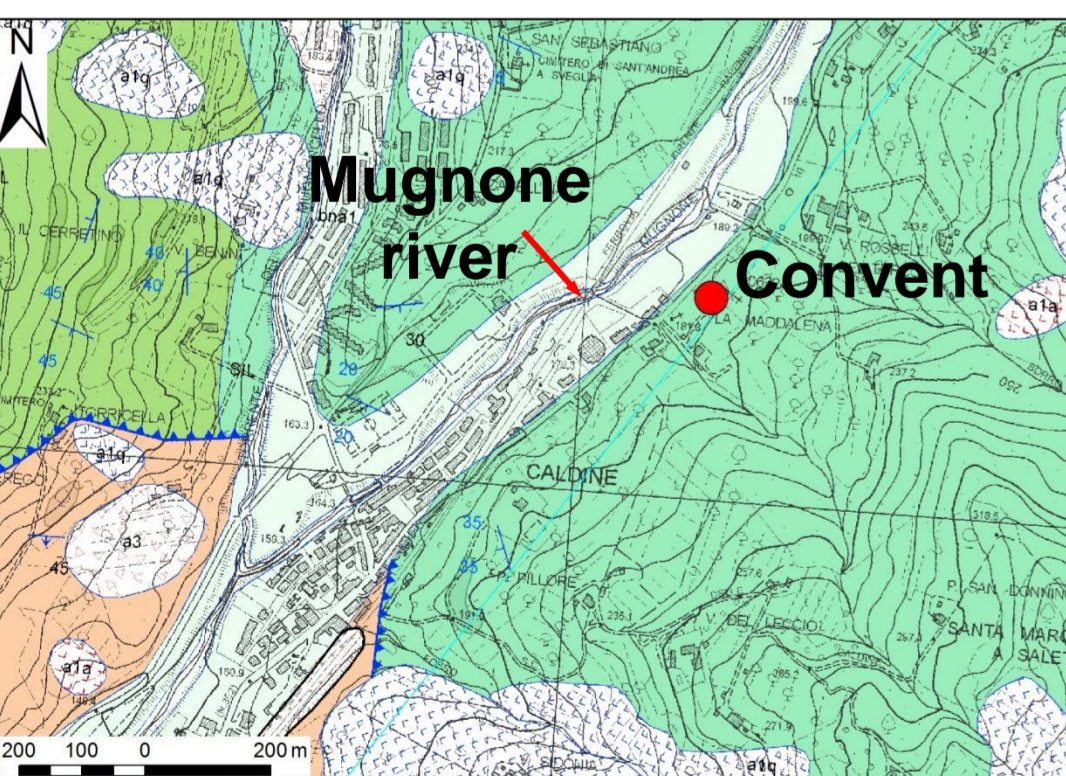
Close examination, combined with archive documentation and on site inspections at the convent, led us to:

1. recognize different techniques to apply the mortar on the support;
  2. hypothesize the use, by Fra Bartolommeo, of materials locally produced.
- Similarly to wall plastering, the "gronda" could be covered by distributing the mortar between the lateral raised edges or over the flat back side of the tile. The latter case is testified by the *Ecce Homo* by Giovanni Antonio Sogliani (ca. 1540-1544) and the *St. John Baptist* by Alessandro Gherardini (ca. 1701). The availability of a permanent kiln in front of the convent and clayey soil, as well as shingle and pebbles from the Mugnone river for the lime production, might explain how the painter experienced such particular painting technique, which was continued by his followers/contemporaries and through centuries.

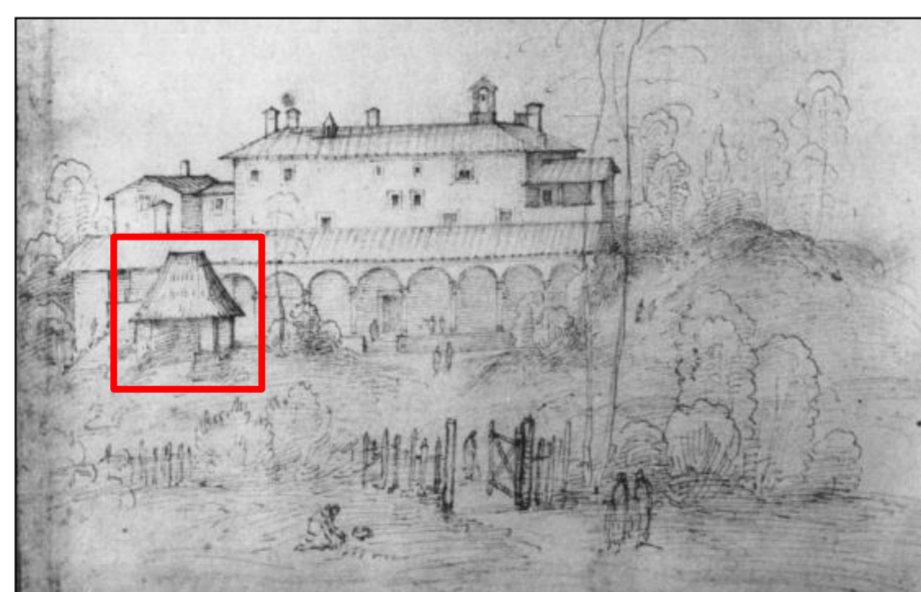
Location of the Convent of Santa Maria Maddalena, where an *Ecce Homo* is still visible as wall embedded, despite the bad condition of the painted surface.



This *Ecce Homo* (ca. 1503-1504) was depicted by applying mortar between the raised edges of the "gronda", which are still visible on the front of the tile.



Regional geological map (scale 1:10,000), sheet 263160. The area is characterized by the Sillano Formation (Upper Cretaceous – Lower Eocene), i.e. *Complesso Caotico*, highly disturbed tectonically and consisting of multicoloured argillites with irregular interbedding of quartz silty sandstones and calcarenite, of marls and marly limestones, quite suitable to obtain clays to produce tiles.



Details of a drawing by Fra Bartolommeo showing the convent (ca. 1508; Smith College of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts).

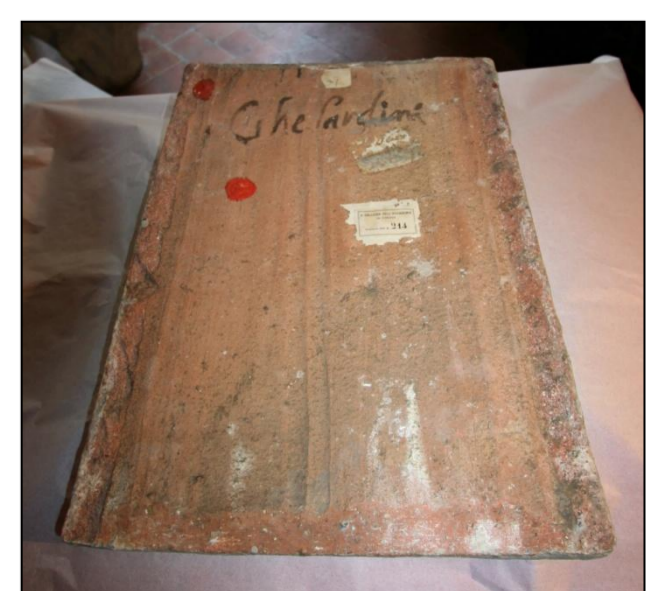
Falletti (1988) here recognized the kiln used for the production of lime and brick materials during the convent construction.



In other cases, the plain tile was totally covered by the mortar. The absence of preparatory drawing confirms a quite rapid execution over the wet plaster. Stylistic, formal and technical differences induce to attribute the tiles to different periods of execution.



Painting on the back side is testified by the *Ecce Homo* by Sogliani (the painting is more a secco technique rather than a true fresco). Not rarely, the raised edges were removed, as found on the tile painted by Gherardini to be added to those by Fra Bartolommeo.



## References

- Falletti F. (1988) Le origini del convento di S. Maria Maddalena in Pian di Mugnone. Indagine storico documentaria. *Rivista d'arte* 4 (40): 63–124.  
 Tapete D. (2009) Pittura murale su supporti non murali: embrici, tegole, terracotte da Fra' Bartolomeo a Pietro Annigoni. *Progetto Restauro* 14 (52): 10–18.

## Acknowledgements

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